

THE BLOG

Message to My Freshman Students

🕒 05/14/2015 05:41 pm ET | Updated Aug 10, 2015



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Keith M. Parsons

Philosopher, historian, author; Professor of Philosophy at University of Houston-Clear Lake

For the first time in many years I am teaching a freshman course, Introduction to Philosophy. The experience has been mostly good. I had been told that my freshman students would be apathetic, incurious, inattentive, unresponsive and frequently absent, and that they would exude an insufferable sense of entitlement. I am happy to say that this characterization was not true of most students. Still, some students are often absent, and others, even when present, are distracted or disengaged. Some have had to be cautioned that class is not their social hour and others reminded not to send text messages in class. I have had to tell these students that, unlike high school, they will not be sent to detention if they are found in the hall without a pass, and that they are free to leave if they are not interested. Actually, I doubt that the differences between high school and university have ever been adequately explained to them, so, on the first class day of next term, I will address my new freshmen as follows:

Welcome to higher education! If you want to be successful here you need to know a few things about how this place works. One of the main things you need to know is the difference between the instructors you will have here and those you had before. Let me take a few minutes to explain this to you.

First, I am your professor, not your teacher. There is a difference. Up to now your instruction has been in the hands of teachers, and a teacher's job is to make sure that you learn. Teachers are evaluated on the basis of learning outcomes, generally as measured by standardized tests. If you don't learn, then your teacher is blamed. However, things are very different for a university professor. It is no part of my job to make you learn. At university, learning is your job — and yours alone. My job is to lead you to the fountain of knowledge. Whether you drink deeply or only gargle is entirely up to you.

Your teachers were held responsible if you failed, and expected to show that they had tried hard to avoid that dreaded result. I am not held responsible for your failures. On the contrary, I get paid the same whether you get an "F" or an "A." My

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dean will not call me in and ask how many conferences I had with your parents about your progress. Indeed, since you are now an adult, providing such information to your parents would be an illegal breach of privacy. Neither will I have to document how often I offered you tutoring or extra credit assignments. I have no obligation whatsoever to make sure that you pass or make any particular grade at all.

Secondly, universities are ancient and tend to do things the old-fashioned way. In high school your education was basically a test-preparation service. Your teachers were not allowed to teach, but were required to focus on preparing you for those all-important standardized tests. Though it galls ideologues, we university professors still enjoy a large degree of academic freedom. That means that the content and format of your courses is still mostly under your professor's control, and the format will probably include a good bit of lecture, some discussion and little or no test preparation.

Lecture has come under attack recently. "Flipped learning" is the current buzz term among higher-education reformers. We old-fashioned chalk-and-talk professors are told that we need to stop being the "sage on the stage," but should become the "guide on the side," helping students develop their problem-solving skills. Lecture, we are told, is an ineffective strategy for reaching today's young people, whose attention span is measured in nanoseconds. We should not foolishly expect them to listen to us, but instead cater to their conditioned craving for constant stimulation.

Hogwash. You need to learn to listen. The kind of listening you need to learn is not passive absorption, like watching TV; it is critical listening. Critical listening means that you are not just hearing but thinking about what you are hearing. Critical listening questions and evaluates what is being said and seeks key concepts and unifying themes. Your high school curriculum would have served you better had it focused more on developing your listening skills rather than drilling you on test-taking.

Finally, when you go to a university, you are in a sense going to another country, one with a different culture and different values. I have come to realize that the biggest gap between you and me is a cultural difference. I have absorbed deeply the norms and values of an ancient academic culture and they are now a part of me. You, on the other hand, come to my classes fresh from a culture with different values, one that finds academic ways strange and hard to understand.

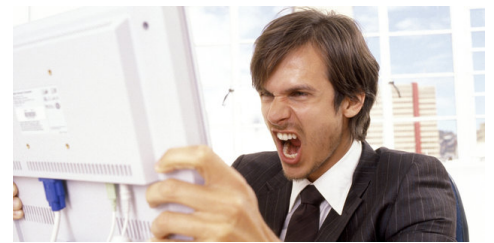
Take the issue of documentation. For an academic, there is something sacred about a citation. The proper citation of a source is a small tribute to the hard work, diligence, intelligence and integrity of someone dedicated enough to make a contribution to knowledge. For you, citations and bibliographies are pointless hoops to jump through and you often treat these requirements carelessly. Further, our differences on the issue of giving or taking proper credit accounts for the fact that you so seldom take plagiarism as seriously as I do.

If you want to know the biggest difference between you and your professor, it is probably this: You see university as a place where you get a credential. For your

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professor, a university is not primarily about credentialing. Your professor still harbors the traditional view that universities are about education. If your aim is to get a credential, then for you courses will be obstacles in your path. For your professor, a course is an opportunity for you to make your world richer and yourself stronger.

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CONVERSATIONS

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Anaximander Quincy Curmudgeon · Tom Brown's School for Obstinent Boys

I taught at UH-Clear Lake back in the '80's. I frankly find your attitude appalling.
What insufferable arrogance!
I have to admit I suffered from the same narcissistic outlook when I first started teaching. It took me a good decade to realize that this was a BAD attitude. I was being paid by the state to inculcate knowledge. Unlike a public school teacher, no one was prescribing the methods, but a great professor should be guided by his ethics. He should use his better understanding of the intricacies and difficulties of his field to be MORE helpful to a student's learning experience than ... [See More](#)

Like · Reply ·  2472 · May 15, 2015 10:11pm



Jez FZ
I love your name.


Like · Reply ·  67 · May 16, 2015 11:45pm



Anaximander Quincy Curmudgeon · Tom Brown's School for Obstinent Boys

Jeremy Sinclair -- Percy Dovetonsil Curmudgeon was taken, alas...

Like · Reply ·  80 · May 16, 2015 11:48pm



Michael Avner · Old Dominion University

I wholeheartedly agree. This academic elitism needs to stop. It turns students OFF from learning, not the other way around. I am always asking my students what I can do to improve, to make sure they remain enthusiastic about the material. I want them enthusiastic about the subject and you don't do that by talking down to them. But that's just me.

Like · Reply ·  252 · May 17, 2015 12:47am

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Axel Arid · Arcata, California

As a high school teacher who teaches AP english, it is sad always has been



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As a high school teacher who teaches AP, amen. It is and always has been the responsibility of the learner to learn. Of course the teacher has a responsibility, but if you learn a foreign language, calculus, or understand a difficult book--it's because you applied yourself.

Like · Reply · 567 · May 14, 2015 8:23pm



Scott Zimmermann

Axel, in American high schools, teachers are routinely blamed-no, excoriated-when their students do poorly. And that culture is one of the key reasons for America's poor performance when compared to other advanced nations.

Like · Reply · 262 · May 15, 2015 6:56am



Barbara Whittenburg Srodulski · Georgetown KY

Scott Zimmermann That is why I lasted only five years as a teacher. Too frustrating.

Like · Reply · 65 · May 15, 2015 3:53pm



Patrick Fleming · Several Colleges and Universities

Scott Zimmermann No, the reason our students don't perform better is because the tests are irrelevant and inappropriate to the required learning and are generated by corporations who want to shame the populace into allowing privatization of schools for corporate profit. This is my 43rd year teaching. Next Fall will be my 44th year. Thanks.

Like · Reply · 333 · May 15, 2015 6:45pm

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Liesel O'Hagan

Funny. As someone who has taught public school as well as college, I always found it comical that professors never were required to learn how to teach. It's an art. Anyone can talk about what they know and are passionate about. Helping someone to develop that knowledge through instruction is the actual art. It's convenient (and a cop out) to blame students for not learning. How lucky you must be to get away with that. It sure makes "teaching" a lot easier.

Like · Reply · 144 · May 17, 2015 6:36pm



Carol Yates Baker · Roanoke Rapids High School

YES!!!

Like · Reply · 3 · May 18, 2015 5:07pm



Jennifer Dole Waffner

AMEN!

Like · Reply · 2 · May 18, 2015 6:05pm



Anaximander Quincy Curmudgeon · Tom Brown's School for Obstinent Boys

My point exactly!

Like · Reply · 3 · May 20, 2015 2:00am

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Susan Rutledge · California, Pennsylvania

Learning is a 2 way street. Yes, students have to learn, but they have to want to learn what you are teaching. More than likely they are forced to take your course to fulfill a general education requirement. You must be quite upset that you chose an area in which few people see the true meaning and application of philosophy. You are a fully tenured, highly paid professor given your comment that you get paid either way, so now we can discern your feelings are hurt; you are saddened because you are having to deal with kids whose brains haven't truly matured and cannot fathom why they do not see

... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 118 · May 15, 2015 7:31am



Susan Rutledge · California, Pennsylvania

You do realize Marc that brain-wise these kids aren't going to be mature like you want them to be. Personally, I think everyone should work a year or 2 before they even attempt college. There is a place for boredom and it is okay to be bored. However, said gentleman who is angry that his students aren't focused on him or his great font of knowledge gets paid either way and regardless. He is throwing a tantrum just like his students who say he wastes their time and money...pomposity at its greatest!

Like · Reply · 33 · May 15, 2015 1:40pm



Kate Broome Dahlstrand · Athens, Georgia

Susan Rutledge I don't see any tantrum being thrown. I see a professor who, matter-of-factly, offers a glimpse into the other side of the fence. This is a well articulated article meant to instruct and inform incoming freshmen on the various differences they will not necessarily notice upon walking onto a college campus. I don't see any resentful tone, just a measured and explicit delineation between where they've been and what they are about to go through. Many of these students often have never considered this topic. This seems a polite notice to give freshmen the first week of school.

Like · Reply · 116 · May 15, 2015 2:19pm



Jez FZ

I agree with some of what you say. What he says is not completely offensive, but the way he abrogates all responsibility for just about everything is so weak and I can't respect him for that at all. I had a friend who is a high school English teacher say that it isn't his job to tell kids how to write. He says they should already know. I mean, come on, I understand theoretically that he needs to focus on higher level things but to say that pausing or modelling good essay writing and reinforcing basic writing skills is not important is an enormous cop-out. That was in the context of talking about a teacher whose way of analysing books was by using a sentence to sentence bullshit analysis. I'm quite sure one or two of those lessons could be cut in half to show how one would write about whatever contrived meaning she wanted us to parrot back to her in the graded essays.

Like · Reply · 5 · May 15, 2015 7:58pm

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Jon Picking

There may be some good points in here (mostly about taking initiative as a student and setting critical thinking as a goal), but a lot of it is pompous crap. Higher education should and will collapse if faculty continue to have these attitudes. Educational research has rigorously demonstrated the effectiveness of student-centered teaching strategies, including the flipped classroom. This is not a function of short attention spans or entitled students, but a function of how the brain takes in and structures new knowledge. Not only is this professor condescending, but continuing to blindly teach... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 96 · May 16, 2015 11:33am



Paulette Marty · Boone, North Carolina


I think you hit on a key issue here. Some professors (perhaps Parsons among them) are resistant to using educational research to inform their teaching (which is terribly ironic since those same academics would likely reject any practices not supported by research in their discipline.) Luckily, as is clear in many of the posts by college faculty in these comments, most faculty are interested in research on teaching and learning and want to use it to improve their classrooms.

Like · Reply · 19 · May 17, 2015 8:43am · Edited



Teresa Smith · Los Angeles, California

I will steadfastly agree. ID. Today's education is not the education of

 I will steadfastly agree, JR. Today's education is not the education of when I attended college. I would have appreciated instructors (this term is easier than quibbling about teacher vs. professor) who understood that everyone has different learning styles, myself a visual learner who could never "get" information presented by endless lines of text. There has to be some fluidity to one's teaching style to ensure that most of the student's learning styles are addressed and appreciated. I also think listening is a two-way street. Would the author even acknowledge a student who came to him stating his style of lecturing was vastly different than the student's learning style? Not sure but would hope so.

Like · Reply ·  7 · May 17, 2015 4:12pm



Jörgen Caceres

Well, I've never taught at universities. My job was in senior high-school, but I really would tell a student that it was their responsibility to achieve the grades they wanted, not mine. I am there to see to it that they get the best preparation for life (and, yes, university) as much as possible. This included not only being prepared to receive knowledge from me as a teacher, but also being prepared to fulfill some basic requirements of social life.

Maybe that makes me pompous too, I don't know. I've never taught traditionally (I reserved the freedom of a teacher to actually teach as I saw f... [See More](#)

Like · Reply ·  3 · May 19, 2015 2:20am

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J Scott Lewis · Assistant Professor of Sociology at Penn State University - Harrisburg

As a professor myself, I give a very similar speech. Most students do not believe what I tell them, though, until it is too late.

Like · Reply ·  126 · May 15, 2015 6:10am



Rachelle Melinda · Eastern Michigan University Graduate School

I remember being a freshman. It took me two years before I started actually learning for myself. It's a tough transition. Now at 38 I am back in school studying a different field that I am passionate about and soaking up all the knowledge I can get. What a difference! I think this speech would have been helpful to me as a freshman.

Like · Reply ·  87 · May 16, 2015 11:43am



Kris Nielsen Sladek · Waterloo West High School

Rachelle Melinda - But I wonder, as that freshman, would you actually have listened? There lies the rub. Freshmen today are even less inclined to listen to a "stodgy old" professor than they were 20 years ago. Somehow we need to find a way to engage our students so that they can begin to listen sooner. A professor lecturing them on how to behave will have the same, or worse, effect on them as a boring, unengaging lecture in any class does.

Like · Reply ·  20 · May 16, 2015 4:25pm



Rachelle Melinda · Eastern Michigan University Graduate School

Kris Nielsen Sladek Probably not. 😊

Like · Reply ·  1 · May 16, 2015 5:45pm

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Meg Tucker

I like the gargle metaphor, but find the false binary he sets up between teachers and professors to be beyond insulting. Teachers merely teach, but professors educate? Teachers don't lead their students to knowledge? Really? Today's teachers might be forced to spend valuable classroom time teaching to the test, but meanwhile they give up their weekends to direct plays and bands -- and to drive their students to sport tournaments

plays and bands -- and to drive their students to sport tournaments, conferences, and academic games. Above all they demand that their students think for themselves and nurture their creativity. As their school year draws to a close (and may it end for them soon) we who are lucky enough to teach at universities should thank all the teachers who work six to seven days a week to EDUCATE their students. Thank you!!! We don't know how you do, but we are in awe of what you do!

Like · Reply ·  45 · May 28, 2015 11:02am · Edited



Carol Yates Baker · Roanoke Rapids High School

How many times can I like this comment?

Like · Reply ·  4 · May 18, 2015 5:06pm



Lisa Odak Ebert · Works at Schools

Secondary ed is exhausting. I moved on to higher ed when I got too tired. My secondary ed training and practices result in stellar student evaluations every semester. I consider it party of my job to teach my college freshmen how to be independent students and critical thinkers.

Like · Reply ·  7 · May 19, 2015 10:14am



Dan DeFazio · Eugene Lang College

For a liberal-leaning website, this is a surprisingly conservative point of view.

Like · Reply ·  44 · May 14, 2015 10:16pm



Pamela Hosey Long · Alabama Iona Ministry School

I have a feeling a lot of your assumptions about the meaning of "conservative" and "liberal" need some adjusting.

Like · Reply ·  118 · May 15, 2015 7:46pm · Edited



John M Donovan · Des Moines, Iowa

Pamela Hosey Long Bingo!

Like · Reply ·  14 · May 16, 2015 10:38am



Van Piercy · Indiana University

The vast majority of faculty believe and want what professor Parsons wants: Grown up students committed to learning.

Like · Reply ·  34 · May 16, 2015 1:04pm

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Michael Rapp · University of the Ozarks

They need more of this attitude on "teaching" in high school. Put the responsibility on the student to master the material. One of the reasons I retired early as a Government and World History teacher was the emphasis on moving them through the system instead of holding them accountable.

Like · Reply ·  40 · May 15, 2015 7:38am



Garrett Whitehorn · COO/Technician at TeamAptitude

Students and teachers, to me, should be equally accountable for outcomes. , and neither side should lay all blame on the other. To do so tells me that the one doing the blame has issues that need to be rectified, such as pride or narcissism or something.

Like · Reply ·  9 · May 16, 2015 12:15pm



Emma Anderson · Kean University

Parents don't want to hear the news that their kids are, at best, average. They perpetuate the Disney tale...

Like · Reply ·  18 · May 16, 2015 2:35pm



Paulett Sutton · Manager, Information Systems at ProTek Devices

That might work for high school students, but it does not for younger children.

Like · Reply ·  1 · May 18, 2015 3:27pm



Phil Murphy · Columbia University



A lovely commentary that mocks credentialing, yet it would appear that it simultaneously defends credentialing as an entitlement to do nothing and change nothing about university education as we know it. Rather than wax poetic about all of the things that are not your job, how about you take pride in helping students to learn something about which you are so passionate? Students' ability to focus in class and manage their time does not appear magically at the age of 18, or just because you think it ought to. They need direction and caring and they need to be taught strategies for how to make i... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 29 · May 16, 2015 1:46pm



Cathy Ingram · Trinity International University

Beautifully said, from a fellow teacher-not-professor.

Like · Reply · 4 · May 16, 2015 3:30pm



Tom Steinfeld · Syracuse, New York

Phil Murphy: I respect your opinion, but what you seem to be overlooking is that college, as I'm sure you know, is VERY different from high school. For example, we instructors don't have the option of contacting students' parents to tell them to make their kids come to class (on time and prepared), to make them do their homework, not to plagiarize compositions, etc. College students are allegedly adults, and they need to learn how to act like it. These are basic expectations; we're not asking them to jump through hoops. All we want is for them to be present, physically and mentally, and not act like they are in middle school (or think that we are there to entertain them). I do all I can to make my classes more engaging (and am going to a workshop to that end this very week), but I can't teach people who don't show up (or those who don't care if they're there or not). The apathy and sense of entitlement are appalling.

Like · Reply · 14 · May 18, 2015 7:18am · Edited

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